

The Guerrilla Hunters: Irregular Conflicts During The Civil War

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Review

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(ed.) McKnight, Brian D. and (ed.) Myers, Barton. *The Guerrilla Hunters: Irregular Conflicts during the Civil War*. LSU Press, \$49.95 ISBN 807164976

A New Collection on Civil War Guerrillas

The essays in this collection continue the conversation started by Michael Fellman, Robert R. Mackey, and especially Daniel E. Sutherland. Fellman's *Inside War* (1989) emphasized how the guerrilla war in Missouri broke down expectations of civilized behavior and unleashed personal and cultural chaos. He raised several issues central to this volume: why guerrilla war was ignored, how social values were destroyed, how women were at risk as both victims and participants, how lines between combatants and noncombatants were blurred, and how war devolved into cycles of revenge and blood sport. Robert R. Mackey's 2004 *Uncivil War* lays out a three-part definition of irregular war. Guerrilla or people's war was fought outside the expected rules of war by self-constituted outfits fighting when and where they pleased, and often veering toward criminality. Partisan war was waged by small elite conventional units fighting in unconventional ways. Conventional cavalry were often used as raiders behind enemy lines, disrupting communications and supply lines. Distinctions among such men as William Quantrill, John S. Mosby, and Nathan Bedford Forrest are important to these essays. And finally, Daniel E. Sutherland's argument (*A Savage Conflict*, 2009) that the guerrilla war was decisive in the Confederacy's defeat is the most important interpretation at stake in *The Guerrilla Hunters*.

Kenneth W. Noe's Foreword ably lays out the three goals of this valuable collection. First, it confronts the still current view that the guerrilla war was a mere sideshow. Second, it demonstrates that there was great human diversity in the guerrilla conflict. Some guerrillas were motivated by beliefs in slavery or states' rights, others by defense of kin and community, others by revenge or profit, and some by criminal psychopathy. Third, the collection deals with the

problem of defining a guerrilla. Several essays use the definitions supplied by Columbia professor Francis Lieber to Henry Halleck. To Lieber, legitimate soldiers were in uniform, recognized by their government, and under its orders. But, as Noe points out and these essays confirm, men could desert from and return to conventional units, guerrilla outfits could sometimes fight alongside regular forces, and both regulars and irregulars could use the same tactics and commit the same atrocities. Noe demonstrates how Gen. George Crook, USA, who led troops at Antietam but also hunted down “savages” in the (West) Virginia mountains, engaged in both conventional and nonconventional combat. These essays show that enlisted men could do the same.

The editors’ introduction argues that Confederate apologists stifled the memory of the guerrilla war because the fact that Unionists, deserters, and draft resisters were fighting a desperate war for survival all over the South would undermine “Lost Cause” narratives. Dissent had no place in stories where communities rallied to a man in defense of their beloved Southland (I’m paraphrasing an Appalachian county history). The editors believe that these essays expand the boundaries of military history to include combatants and noncombatants, but also by doing “history from the bottom up” place guerrillas in their proper social context—the people’s war, the war most Southerners knew.

Barton A. Myers’s study of the petitions of would-be commanders of partisan rangers to the Confederate War Department reveals that ranger service appealed strongly to Southern individualism and idealized self-images. The Partisan Ranger Act aimed to keep irregular warfare enthusiasts in uniform and within a chain of command, and therefore entitled to the same prisoner of war rights as regulars. However, many men thought that the act sanctioned any kind of guerrilla fighting, and while John S. Mosby’s 43rd Virginia Cavalry Battalion was a conspicuous success, overwhelmingly the guerrillas unleashed by the act brought devastation all over the South. Ranger units competed with the regular military for volunteers, rangers tended to forage friend and foe, and ranger acts of war provoked Union retaliation that disrupted the communities they had hoped to defend.

Brian D. McKnight’s essay on the shadowy Appalachian guerrilla also stresses his complexity. Some irregulars had formal training, fought alongside regulars, and accepted Confederate aims; others sniped at their foes when and where they pleased. He denies that guerrillas were ignorant poor whites; rather, they were frequently men who knew the issues central to the war and who had a

stake in Confederate victory. McKnight modifies Mackey's definitions of nonconventional warfare to emphasize bushwhackers, and notes that race wars with Indians and Mexicans provided precedents for spectacular guerrilla atrocities. He emphasizes that guerrillas, though violent paranoics, were also pragmatic opportunists who, by operating outside military structure, could vent their frustrations on others at will. Finally, he stresses a common theme in these essays: isolated acts of violence were how most civilians experienced the war.

Two of these essays focus on individuals who, in very different ways, challenge the definition of the term "guerrilla." Brian Steel Wills reminds us that Nathan Bedford Forrest, often called a guerrilla by his enemies, insisted that he was simply a regular Confederate officer who used unconventional tactics. Forrest used his frightening reputation to bluff lesser opponents, excelled at seizing the initiative, and exercised his rustic sense of honor against people he thought were incapable of honor—like slaves or Unionist renegades. These values contributed to the massacre perpetrated by his uncontrollable troopers at Fort Pillow and the murder of sleeping Union soldiers after Forrest's defeat at Selma. And Wills points out that Forrest's penchant for acting on his own bought him a tactically brilliant victory at Brice's Crossroads at the expense of the Confederacy's Atlanta campaign. Yet Forrest himself equated guerrillas with plunderers who damaged the Confederate war effort, and emphatically rejected the idea of continuing the war by guerrilla means. Adam Dombey, writing about John Gatewood, who has been accepted as a successful rebel guerrilla in the no man's land of late-war north Georgia and East Tennessee, reveals him to have been simply a sociopathic freebooter and murderer—what Dombey calls, in modern terms, a warlord, an individual who controls a region through violence and patronage to his own benefit. Rewarding his men with spoils taken from Southern citizens, avoiding Federal forces, never cooperating with the Confederate military, and attacking those who opposed his local dominance, he meets no definition of a guerrilla. Indeed, as Southern soldiers deserted to protect their families from his ravages, he actually hurt the Southern cause.

Stephen Rockenbach's essay on Kentucky "home rebels"—men who had accepted Lincoln's offer of amnesty but had used it as a cover for continued violent opposition to the Union cause—emphasizes their political goals. In the summer of 1864, a decidedly mixed assemblage of Union army deserters, Confederate sympathizers, Copperhead Democrats, and outlaws began to target unconditional Unionists, men who had stuck with Lincoln through the Emancipation Proclamation and the recruitment of Kentucky African Americans

into the local military. Their goal was to maintain white supremacy. Like guerrillas elsewhere, they might join Confederate raiders like John Hunt Morgan, but concentrated mostly on terrorizing and assassinating local enemies. Highly mobile, they were so effective that Kentucky's Unionists demanded that Lincoln withdraw the amnesty, and Stephen Burbridge, Union military commander in Kentucky, took increasingly Draconian measures against them. Both to no avail; postwar Kentucky was more Confederate in sentiment than the state had been during the war, as irregulars continued their campaign as "regulators."

Notorious Tinker Dave Beaty's Unionist guerrillas contested Fentress County, in Tennessee's Upper Cumberland Valley, with even more notorious Champ Ferguson's Confederates. Aron Astor's study of Beaty's men uses social network theory and the General Provost Records to find out just who they were. Historians have claimed that Confederate guerrillas tended to be sons of slaveholders in commercial farming districts, while their Unionist enemies were likely to be isolated in mountain districts farther from the rivers and roads necessary for commerce. And to a degree this works for Fentress County. But there were very obvious exceptions—prosperous slaveholding Unionists. By looking at the social connections of Beaty's men, Astor finds that though some were indeed neighbors of Unionists in the isolated coves, and many joined in reaction against Ferguson, nearly all were related to each other or to Beaty's kin. Astor stresses that guerrillas operated by knowing their networks: whom they could trust, whom they should follow, who their enemies were, and where they could find refuge and get supplies. Social network theory investigates the bonds that hold individuals together, and therefore can illuminate how and why and where Beaty's men were recruited, and how they could survive as a minority in extremely hostile circumstances.

Scott Thompson looks at the irregular war in Loudon County, Virginia, on the contested border adjacent to Maryland and (West) Virginia. Loudon supported Union and Confederate companies, both mostly drawn from young farmers and laborers and both committed ideologically to the war and to protecting neighbors and kin. The Confederate "Comanches" defended the right of secession, supported slavery, believed in states' rights, and understood Republicans as abolitionists with monarchical tendencies. They embraced the ideal of independent partisan rangers, but were organized as part of the 35th Virginia Cavalry Battalion. The Unionist Loudon Rangers, organized by the Union army but also wishing to operate independently, believed in an indivisible Union; with some Quaker antecedents, they were antislavery and embraced free

labor values. In both armies, control of the border took precedence over local concerns, so each side sent regulars to intervene in Loudon's irregular war, and neither company had the autonomy it wanted. They waged a partisan local civil war that the Confederate majority dominated, but they also fought in the Antietam campaign, and served alongside conventional soldiers in defense of the border. Rangers and Comanches alike resisted being sent far away from their homes—the Rangers more successfully, while the more ideologically committed Comanches marched away. However, they left behind a group under John Mobberley who refused to leave Loudon, and who soon won a reputation as brutal guerrillas. Eliminating Mobberley's gang would be the main accomplishment of the Loudon Rangers.

Lisa Franks argues that Federals fought a war on women in which regular soldiers from Sheridan's and Sherman's armies acted as guerrillas, targeting and terrorizing the plantation mistresses they believed to have been at the heart of the Confederate war. Threatening and mocking, destroying not just food supplies but also women's personal possessions and family souvenirs, by irregular tactics regular soldiers sought to break down Southern resistance. Franks believes that male scholars' gendered readings of the Union troops' behavior tend to ignore female voices and values, and consequently emphasize physical while largely ignoring psychological damage, sanitizing the "Hard War" against civilians.

Matthew M. Stith concludes that the difficult terrain and varied built environments of the trans-Mississippi perpetuated the brutal guerrilla war there. While Union counter-irregular forces tried to learn the environment, they usually failed to match their enemies' knowledge and supporting civilian networks. They then turned against the built environment—home, barn, fields, pigpens—that sustained both groups. Civilian families' success in defending their animals and corn determined whether they would live out the war at home or as refugees. As farmers' carefully improved natural environment reverted to wilderness, commercial agriculture returned to subsistence for survival.

Laura June Davis expands the definition of irregular war by investigating how St. Louis-based boat burners, financed and overseen by the Confederate War Department, impeded the passage of Union troops and supplies down the lower Mississippi after Vicksburg. Self-constituted groups of experienced steamboat men, gathering information from bars and brothels, planted incendiary devices in a hard guerrilla war against boats and passengers, public and private. Protected by their social networks, they were able to thwart Federal spies,

gunboat patrols, and local lawmen impressed into Union service. As with all successful guerrillas, the damage they did was compounded by fear and the need to divert troops against them.

Joseph M. Beilein, Jr. makes heavy drinking central to the Missouri guerrilla conflict. He uses social research to debunk the idea that drunkenness was simply an excuse for violent behavior; rather, drinking was a part of guerrilla culture. The ability to hold your liquor was a measure of manhood, drinking together made comrades, and alcohol might ease the hardships of living in the brush and even remove inhibitions against murder. Drinking did not cause massacres like Centralia; by that time “no quarter” was a fact of guerrilla life and mutilation a tool of terror. But whiskey did make it possible for guerrillas to endure the escalating violence of the bitter, bloody war in Missouri.

Matthew C. Hurlbert compares four stories about the murder and mutilation of Larkin M. Skaggs, one of Quantrill’s marauders who was captured by the people of Lawrence. By looking at the individual stories before they coalesced into a single narrative of guerrilla brutality and civilian innocence, Hurlbert can understand how individual families experienced the attack. To protect Lawrence’s self-image of innocence, nonwhites were depicted as the grisly avengers. Both for the guerrillas, who had split into small bands staging a series of home invasions, and for the victims, Quantrill’s raid devolved into something very like the household guerrilla war that plagued rural Kansas and Missouri. Individual households were both the necessary centers of supply and information for the guerrillas and, in turn, the targets of guerrilla hunters.

Anthony Fialka’s spatial analysis of the Missouri Confederate guerrillas’ domestic supply line rests on three digitized sources: the available primary and secondary sources on Missouri’s guerrilla war; the Missouri Provost Marshals’ papers, for guerrilla movements, the actions of their supporters and abettors, and the reaction of Unionists; and a digitized version of Frederick Dyer’s *Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*, for the spatial location of the Union army’s movements. Union general Thomas Ewing, Jr., commander on the Missouri-Kansas border, made war on the guerrillas’ terms by making war at the household level. Civilians were jailed, banished, and assaulted; ultimately he depopulated the counties at the heart of this irregular war zone. Fialka’s analysis finds Ewing’s strategy successful: the only way to end household war was to end households. The nexus of guerrilla activity, rebel households, and Union army retaliation then shifted to the east, to the state’s wealthiest counties along the

Missouri and Mississippi rivers, where guerrillas fought to protect their futures as slaveholders, while Union counter-irregular efforts focused, again, on households, targeting noncombatants.

Andrew F. Lang tackles the effects of unrestrained guerrilla warfare on Union soldiers. Fighting a war with no rules could not help but brutalize all participants. Michael Fellman has argued that this mode of war broke down all social conventions; Lang demonstrates that Lieber's rules, which urged restraint but allowed wide latitude to soldiers in the field, reflected official concern about this breakdown but could not control revenge for murdered comrades and preemptive strikes against suspected guerrilla households. Federals lost all respect for their foes, increasingly seeing them as savages in a savage landscape, inferiors culturally and even racially—like Indians or Mexicans. Their conception of themselves as citizen-soldiers fatally undermined, they became themselves guerrillas.

Earl J. Hess's work runs counter to the rest of the essays in this collection in that he places guerrilla struggles in a global comparative perspective and takes a purely military point of view. Debunking the salience of the famed Spanish guerrilla war against Napoleon, he further denies that guerrillas had a decisive impact on the American Civil War. Against Lincoln's and Davis's combined total of 1,400, 000 men under arms, the 50,000 or so guerrillas seem relatively unimportant; only lower level officers and few Federal troops were assigned to control guerrillas, who never inflicted a strategic defeat on them; and the suffering caused by irregulars and counter-guerrilla units outweighed any military benefits they might have generated. Finally, he agrees with Jefferson Davis that continuing the war after Appomattox would have had no hope of success, while exponentially increasing civilian suffering: there are no international examples of a people winning by irregular war *after* losing a conventional war.

In a metahistorical Afterword, Daniel Sutherland offers a semi-autobiographical account of how he came to believe that the guerrilla war was decisive. Starting by looking at the conflict in Arkansas, he found that for most civilians and soldiers the guerrilla war was how they experienced the war. Learning that Michael Fellman had discovered the same for Missouri, Sutherland soon became impressed at how similar was the guerrilla war waged in very different sections of the South. In *A Savage Conflict* he argued that the guerrilla war, uncontrollable, ravaging friend and foe alike and ultimately bringing down

Federal retaliation, undermined confidence in the Confederate government and destroyed many Southerners' willingness to fight, and thus played a decisive role in Confederate defeat. Here, appealing to the "new military history" *contra* Hess, he reiterates that only those historians who ignore social consequences can deny the decisive impact of the guerrilla war. He suggests that much research needs to be done to extend the contributions made in this book. Kentucky and Missouri were borderland Union states; was the war waged and remembered differently in the Deep South? How did the irregular war damage slavery? And how did the guerrilla experience shape Southern response to Reconstruction--were guerrillas involved in the Ku Klux Klan violence? Finally, he wants to integrate guerrillas into the larger framework of Civil War studies, along with the conventional war, diplomacy, and politics that usually dominate how we understand the era.

These essays raise other valuable questions. Sutherland asks who the guerrillas were, and while there is solid research identifying them as small slaveholders and their sons, many do not fit this description. Quantrill was an Ohio schoolteacher, Kit Dalton a backwoods farmer, Sam Hildebrand and Bloody Bill Anderson from plain folk farm families with reputations for livestock theft. John McCorkle also called himself a farm boy. George Todd was a bridge mason. The idea that the "Lost Cause" narrative stifled the memory of guerrilla war is an intriguing one—but the irregular war was also conveniently forgotten in locales, like West Virginia and Appalachian Pennsylvania, where the "Lost Cause" view never dominated. These are only two examples of the many questions raised by an excellent collection like this one.

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